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## **Euro Vision: Attitudes towards the European Union**

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## Euro Vision: Attitudes towards the European Union

*Sile O'Connor and Lee McGowan*

The European Union (EU) impinges on national and regional policy in a number of ways. Despite this, information on the level and sources of knowledge of, and attitudes towards, the EU in Northern Ireland is extremely limited. The data that are available date from 1993 and relate exclusively to attitudes to monetary union and European political integration. In view of the significantly changed context since 1993, both because of EU developments and the Northern Ireland Peace Process, in particular the development of political institutions following the Belfast Agreement in 1998, data on the current situation is of considerable significance.

This Research Update explores current attitudes towards, and levels of knowledge of, EU issues in Northern Ireland, as well as making comparisons with data on attitudes in Northern Ireland in 1993 and contemporary data on Britain and the Republic of Ireland. This analysis will also function as a benchmark for attitudes and knowledge that will facilitate analysis of future change. The Northern Ireland data come from the 2002 **Northern Ireland Life and Times survey** and the 1993 **Northern Ireland Social Attitudes survey**, while the comparative data come from Eurobarometer surveys.

### Knowledge about the EU

The influence of the EU on national policy making is subject to, and is the outcome of, contributions from national political party representatives and groups such as employers, trade unions and other civil society groups. Despite the importance of these representations and their outcome, there is considerable



evidence from several EU countries that media attention to EU issues is infrequent. While issues such as the introduction of the euro, European Parliament elections and the agreement of treaties such as Amsterdam and Nice enjoy periods of media attention, there is little consistent coverage of routine EU developments. In view of this, what is the level of knowledge about EU policy issues in Northern Ireland and how do people acquire information on the EU?

In 2002, only four out of ten Life and Times respondents had heard or read something about the EU over the previous 12 months. There were differences by gender (48% of men and 34% of women) and level of education (75% of those with third level qualifications compared to only 24% of those with no formal qualifications), but

no significant differences between respondents saying that they were unionist, nationalist or neither.

Respondents were then asked to identify how much they knew about the EU, its policies and institutions on a 10 point scale, which ranged from 1 'know nothing at all' to 10 'know a great deal'. Table 1 shows that exactly one half of respondents classified themselves on points 1 or 2, that is, they know very little, while only 1% classified themselves on points 9 or 10, that is, knowing a great deal. Again, there are differences by gender and level of education, with women and respondents with no formal qualifications being significantly more likely to say they 'know nothing at all'. The most popular sources of knowledge on EU issues were television (85%), newspapers (83%) and radio (62%).

Table 1: Knowledge about the European Union, its policies and its institutions (2002)

	%						
	Gender		Higher Educational Qualification				
Level of knowledge (points)	Male	Female	Tertiary	A-level	Other	None	All
Know nothing at all (1 or 2)	39	58	20	32	51	64	50
3 or 4	33	28	31	45	33	25	30
5 or 6	19	10	34	14	11	9	14
7 or 8	8	3	14	10	4	2	5
Know a great deal (9 or 10)	1	1	1	-	1	1	1

A similar pattern arose when respondents were asked about their level of interest in the EU. Using a 10 point scale, nearly half of all respondents (45%) classified themselves on points 1 or 2 of the scale, with only 2% on points 9 or 10.

## Information access and relevance

Respondents were asked if they had tried to find out information about the EU, its regulations or funding over the previous 12 months. The 8% who had done so reported that its acquisition was either very or fairly easy. The most used source was the internet (36%) and the largest category of information sought was on finances/grants or funding (22%).

There was some indication that people were more likely to be informed about EU related issues that impinged directly on their experience. For example, 62% knew that Northern Ireland has 3 Members of the European Parliament, 54% knew that British and Irish citizens abroad can use the embassies and consulates of other EU countries if there is no British or Irish embassy in that country, and 44% knew that there is a European Commission office in Belfast. In contrast, 42% wrongly agreed with the statement that 'there are 20 countries in the EU' and 45% wrongly agreed that the EU Commission passes all EU legislation.

## Attitudes towards the EU

### *Membership value and benefits*

Despite the relatively low level of knowledge about the EU, attitudes towards it are relatively positive. Only 4% of respondents considered that Northern Ireland's participation in the EU was 'a bad thing': nearly half (46%) consider it 'a good thing'. This is considerably higher than the Eurobarometer figure for the United Kingdom (UK), Sweden, Austria and Finland, identical to that for Germany but considerably lower than the Republic

Table 2: Views on Participation in the European Union (2002)

	%	
Country/Region	Participation is a good thing	Participation has been beneficial
United Kingdom	32	35
(Northern Ireland)	46	48
Republic of Ireland	74	85

of Ireland (74%) and nine other EU countries (see Table 2). Consistent with this pattern, only 11% of Life and Times respondents considered that Northern Ireland has not benefited from membership while 48% think it has benefited. The latter is considerably higher than the UK figure (35%) and considerably lower than the Republic of Ireland (85%) and several other EU countries.

### *Identification as European*

Almost one third of Life and Times respondents always (8%) or sometimes (23%) think of themselves as European. This includes a higher percentage of men (37%) than women (25%), as well as a higher percentage of those aged 18 to 24 years (43%) than those aged 25 to 30 years (32%) or those aged over 30 years (29%). Nationalist respondents are also more likely to think of themselves as European than those who are unionist, or neither nationalist nor unionist (38%, 23% and 34% respectively).

Looking at party identification, the majority of respondents supporting the Alliance Party (58%) always or sometimes identify themselves as European, which contrasts with 37% of Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) supporters, 33% of Sinn Féin supporters, 27% of Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) supporters and 14% of Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) supporters. Nearly half of respondents with no declared religion (45%) said that they always or sometimes think of themselves as European, compared with 35% of Catholics and 25% of Protestants.

The most noteworthy differences related to educational level and

occupation. Sixty per cent of respondents with a degree or higher qualification always or sometimes think of themselves as European, as do 41% of those with A-levels or equivalent qualifications. However, only 18% of those with no formal qualifications fall into this category. Just over half of respondents (56%) in professional occupations always or sometimes consider themselves as European.

Table 3: Opinions on UK policy towards the EU (2002)

	%			
Identification	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither	All
Leave EU	15	2	4	8
Reduce powers	21	14	18	18
Leave as is	34	38	39	37
Increase powers	24	32	25	27
Work for single EU government	6	13	12	10

However, this figures falls to 36% for those in non-manual occupations and to 21% for those in manual occupations.

### UK Policy towards the EU

The policy of the UK government towards the EU is of long-standing political contention, and is a source of current political debate and party differentiation in Britain. Differences in

attitudes towards the EU by party identification were identified in Northern Ireland in 1993. Do these still persist and has there been change over the decade?

The clear pattern evident from Table 3 is that only a minority of respondents in 2002 hold strongly negative views about the EU: only 8% believe that the UK

should leave the EU. While 18% believe that its powers should be reduced, the majority (64%) support the status quo or an increase in EU powers. Differences by political identification are evident, particularly in relation to opinions at the extreme ends of the spectrum - 'leave EU' and 'work for single EU government' - with those identifying themselves as unionist being more likely to be negative. However, a strong majority of all political groupings are in favour of the status quo or increased powers for the EU.

Table 4 shows that there are differences within the political groupings. DUP supporters are far more negative than UUP supporters. Amongst nationalist parties, SDLP supporters are more strongly favourable of the EU than are Sinn Féin supporters. Yet, it is important to note that the vast majority of all party supporters are favourably disposed towards the EU. Compared with 1993 data, with the exception of the DUP supporters, the pattern is one of increased support for the EU, and differences across parties, particularly UUP and SDLP, have lessened over time.

Table 4: Opinions on UK policy towards the EU, 2002 (1993 in brackets)

	%						
	UUP	SDLP	DUP	Alliance	Sinn Féin	None	All
Leave EU	8 (9)	2 (2)	28 (13)	3 (1)	5 (-)	6	8 (7)
Reduce powers	24 (31)	12 (11)	11 (25)	11 (25)	23 (5)	20	18 (21)
Leave as is	38 (25)	39 (35)	31 (29)	37 (16)	27 (26)	41	36 (24)
Increase powers	25 (23)	35 (35)	19 (17)	36 (45)	31 (24)	19	27 (26)
Work for single EU government	4 (5)	12 (27)	11 (9)	14 (27)	14 (31)	14	11 (13)

Table 5: Opinions on future of sterling (2002)

	%			
Identification	Unionist	Nationalist	Neither	All
Single currency - euro	20	60	37	37
£ sterling and euro	11	10	19	13
£ sterling only	69	30	44	50
All	6	13	12	10

### Sterling - euro Issue

The issue of the £ sterling and the euro is also one of ongoing political debate. It is noteworthy that political identification differences on this issue are more strongly evident than for UK policy towards EU membership. Table 5 shows that one half of all Life and Times respondents expressed a preference for use of the £ sterling only, with 37% supporting use of the euro alone, and 13% supporting the euro and £ sterling. The majority of nationalists (60%) supported use of the euro, while the majority of unionists (69%) supported use of the £ sterling only.

A comparison of the 2002 and 1993 data indicates increased support for the Euro across supporters of all political parties except for the DUP. Despite this, the majority of all supporters of unionist parties are strongly in favour of the maintenance of sterling as the exclusive currency.

## Summary and Conclusions

The survey data indicate that knowledge of the EU, its policies and institutions is low in Northern Ireland, and that there are significant differences across socio-economic, gender and educational groups. However, there is some evidence that knowledge levels are higher in areas

of immediate relevance, for example travel and voting, that is, in relation to citizenship rights type issues. Overall, attitudes towards the EU are relatively favourable and are becoming more positive over time. Supporting this trend, it is noteworthy that the vast majority of the respondents (86%) agree that 'children in Northern Ireland should be taught about the EU and how it works' and only 2% disagree with this statement.

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The Europe module of the 2002 Life and Times survey was made possible by funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (RES 000 22 0017). Sile O'Connor is Professor of Social Policy in the School of Policy Studies, University of Ulster. Lee McGowan is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Politics and International Studies, Queen's University, Belfast.

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## Key Points

- Knowledge of the EU, its policies and institutions is low in Northern Ireland and there are significant differences across socio-economic, gender and educational groups.
- Attitudes towards the EU in Northern Ireland are relatively favourable.
- Three quarters of respondents support the status quo or an increase in EU powers. This includes a substantial majority of all political groupings.
- Support for the EU increased between 1993 and 2002 amongst all political party supporters, with the exception of the DUP.
- Differences among parties, particularly UUP and SDLP, have lessened over time.
- The majority of nationalists support use of the euro only, while the majority of unionists support use of sterling.

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2002, 1800 adults were interviewed in their own home. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The Life and Times Survey is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings ([www.ark.ac.uk/nilt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/nilt)) or call the survey directors on 028 9027 3034 with any queries.

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